

## ***Before Mackay,----- “HOUSTON”***

*By Earl Lockie, Pres. SCHS*

No, this Houston wasn't a part of Texas history, but a spot right here in the Lost River Valley that eventually became the very roots of the place we call home, Mackay, Idaho. Among the first permanent settlers who came to the Lost River country in 1878, some came to prospect in the mountains and a number came with an eye to the fertile ground of the valley as good place to raise livestock and begin ranching. An overview of the lower valley in 1885 found but few residents and only a handful of settlements of any consequence. It boasted the mining community of Era and the stage stop at Kennedy's Crossing , forerunners of the present town of Arco. Farther up river the sparsely settled valley was dotted with a few ranches and homesteads. There was a small settlement called Lost River, not too far from the present site of Moore and up the valley even farther, Alder City, a declining mining camp near the mouth of Alder Creek. Cliff City, another mining community, located about 4 miles up in Cliff Creek canyon gave purpose to a bustling new town there on the south bank of the river. Located about four miles down river from what is now Mackay, it was called **-HOUSTON !**

Until about 1884 the stage and freight route originating in Blackfoot and terminating in Salmon River country came up the valley on the river's right from the stage station at Kennedy's Crossing (Old Arco) near what is now present day Arco. The next stage stop was the A.N. Anderson ranch, a few miles north of present day Moore, then on to the Battleground (near the Mackay Dam site) and Willow Creek (Dickey) stage stops and over the summit. But with the new mining discoveries and activity in the local White Knob range, this transportation route would change significantly. The newly created mining camps of Alder City, Cliff City, and new settlements of Carbonate and Houston needed materials and supplies and to accommodate them the stage began a new route . It now came up the valley on the river's south west side with a new stop at the Powell ranch at the mouth of Antelope Creek. From there it was on to the new settlement at Houston, near where the river was bridged and the stage route continued across the river and up valley where it connected with the old route to Battleground.

The location of Houston, this new town and stage stop, was probably no accident. (A Mr. B.F. Brown, an investor in the smelter at Cliff is said to have selected the town site.) Located just about four miles from Cliff City at the foot of the canyon, and about the same distance from the White Knob Mines and the bulk of mining activity of the day, Houston was assured an optimistic future. Its location on the rather flat riverbank terrain and near a river bridge made it a natural for a stage stop and town of some importance.

Houston's beginnings go back to January 1884 when, as a result of ore discoveries and high levels of mining activity close by, Mart Houston, an early homesteader in the Antelope Creek area, set up a saloon, store and established a post office there along the river. Besides a man of vision, Mart must have been quite a storyteller. Legend has it that the town's name was decided by a competition among the community's menfolk as to who could tell the most far-fetched tale. Mart Houston was its winner. The town, now bearing his name, expanded rapidly and by years end, the construction of many dwellings had been completed as well as that of several stores and a hotel started by a Mrs.

Vance. It was truly a boom town as its population exploded to over 400 seemingly overnight; and not just miners but families too. A school was established almost immediately and soon had an enrollment of nearly 60 students. This furious expansion would continue for a year or so with ever more of the profit minded setting up businesses of every description. As the miners, builders, skilled workmen and laborers, and their families, flocked to the area, Houston accommodated them all. In addition to boarding houses, restaurants, saloons, mercantiles, liveries, blacksmiths, etc., a Methodist church was established and even the valley's first newspaper, the Houston Press. But according to one source, this growth and prosperity, and town itself, came into jeopardy in late 1885-86 when a severe slump in mining activity left some 65 buildings empty and but 8 inhabitants. Only after construction, in 1887, of an ore concentrator and a rejuvenation of mining activity, did Houston enjoy a revival and for the next decade, continue to grow and prosper.

### ***"HOUSTON"---at the turn of the century***

Houston would weather a number of the inherent boom and bust cycles of mining on the mountain and even the record severe winter of 1890-91. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century dawned, Houston had become the metropolis of Custer county and only real town of any consequence in the whole valley. It had everything! It was at the perfect location along the river at the head of the canyon to Cliff and roads leading to nearby mines (Big Copper) of White Knob. Alder City had faded away as Houston became the hub of upper valley activity. It had become the center and main supply point for everything going on up on the "Mine Hill" and the place was alive and bustling. And it took care of the needs of the increasing number of ranchers and homesteaders as well. Houston provided most of the supplies, services and even entertainment for the entire area. It had become a major stop on the daily stage route from Blackfoot to Challis as well as an important layover point for the freight wagons on their way into Salmon River country. Differing accounts of its heyday population vary from 400 to 1600, but most sources indicate it was about that of present day Mackay, about 600. By this time, in addition to its half dozen saloons, the usual lodging houses, liveries, and eating establishments, Houston boasted a doctor, drug store, bakery, jeweler, laundries, meat market, implement dealers, law offices, a U.S. Commissioner, Justice-of-the-Peace, barber shops, building contractors, a saw mill, shooting galleries and the Mystum Lodge where many of the town's social and entertainment events took place.

By the summer of 1901, Houston was literally busting at the seams. Recorded observations in late summer of that year, by noted poet-pro prospector-drifter-sometimes journalist **Clarence Eddy**, revealed, *"The town was full of teams and men. Buildings old and new were supplanted by numerous tents. All the seats were filled in the saloons and drinkers were three deep at the bar. Everywhere was eating and drinking with zest. The place was overrun with men from the railway that was now drawing to completion."* Activity on a number of fronts had reached a furious pace. Engineers of the White Knob Mine had just put crews of men and their mules to work dragging the 12 mile roadbed for the mine's electric railway system. All the carpenters and bricklayers in the area were busy with construction of the mines' new smelter going up at the base of the "Hill". The

railroad tracks of the OSL from Blackfoot had nearly reached their end at the new Mackay town site, with work on the roadbed in progress just a mile or two north on the other side of the river. And not to be lost in all that activity was the frantic work going on just up river where the new village of Mackay was taking shape. A few news items in the Houston Press newspaper issues of August 1901 alluded to all this activity.

*" Brick kilns in Houston extremely busy supplying bricks for the new smelter. "*

*" The local lumber and saw mill has been unable to keep up with the demand for lumber. "*

*" The new school building will be completed by next Wednesday evening if nothing out of the ordinary happens. "*

*" A new telephone line has just been activated from Houston to the smelter site at White Knob. "*

*" The Mackay town site has all been surveyed and lots are being offered for sale. "*

*" Dirt being excavated from the smelter site is being used in the grade work of the smelter road. "*

*" The sagebrush grabbing machine now in operation on the Mackay town site is doing good work and will soon have all the sage brush removed. "*

With all this activity going on it may have been difficult for those in Houston to gain a sense of the impending doom for their thriving town. But the handwriting was on the wall, as the newspaper itself announced it would soon be moving to the new town. Clarence Eddy recorded that *"Events were shaping up fast for the new town of Mackay and as a matter of newspaper enterprise, about the first building there was rushed to completion as the office of Jones' paper, henceforth to be known as the Mackay Telegraph, with the two Jones brothers and their printer as the pioneers of prohibition."* (Ordinances of the new village prohibited saloons)

Even so, any intimidation felt by residents of Houston by this emerging new town in the area, was overshadowed by the prosperity of the moment. There was still money to be made by businessman and laborer alike. The Houston Press forecasted work for up to 1000 men in the next 90 days. It's possible many in Houston felt the two towns could coexist with plenty of prosperity to go around. But then too, there was that other new community sprouting there on the "Hill" near the mines, "White Knob". They very soon realized that, "though once they'd had it all",---- they were now too far from the action and on the wrong side of the river. Houston's location, which had been such a plus early on, was now a detriment to its survival.

### ***HOUSTON'S LAST DAYS***

The railroad, with initial ideas of pushing on past Mackay and over the hill to Challis and Salmon River country, had laid the tracks a good two miles north and across the river from their bustling community. Even their own newspaper was pessimistic about the future of Houston, almost promoting the new village being laid out up river at the end of the tracks. As the railroad track's last spike was driven in September of 1901, Houston's end was in sight. Many a business made their intentions known of setting up shop in Mackay. In the year that followed, a major exodus from

Houston took place. The bridge across the river there saw more traffic than at any time previous. Business buildings and dwellings of all descriptions were moved intact or dismantled and transported across the river to the new village site. Ironically, the new railroad depot at Mackay, a symbol of the very cause of Houston's demise, was built with reclaimed lumber from the dismantled town.

Houston did not disappear immediately; its death was a gradual event. Of course with the arrival of the first train that October, carrying passengers, freight and the mail, the need for the stage line from Blackfoot evaporated and with it Houston's importance as a stage stop. Records indicate that a daily stage did operate between Houston and Mackay for a time, probably to handle passenger traffic in the interim until Mackay's facilities could grow and catch up to handle their estimated 1200 population by year's end. And, of course, with Mackay being ordained a "dry" town, Houston's saloons persisted for a number of years. The Houston post office would close in 1905 followed in 1907, by Mrs. Vance's hotel, a landmark there since 1884.

A drive over the Houston bridge today (a few hundred yards downstream of the original) and a look-over of the old Houston town site area reveals little of that busting-at-the-seams community of a 100 years ago; that fore runner of Mackay. Shortly after crossing the bridge and rounding the corner and a bit off the road on the left, one can see an old weathered structure said to have been a slaughter house. Farther on, a road to the right marked with a sign, slopes up to the site of the Houston pioneer cemetery, the resting place of many of the area's earliest residents. Alongside this road stands the most permanent of landmarks of the Houston era, a building constructed of native stone. Sources indicate it was built in the 1890's at the request of mercantile businessman J.H. Greene as a warehouse for perishables; cool in the summer and warm in the winter. It probably remains today only because of the inability to move it during the exodus to Mackay in the early 1900's.

Most evidence of Houston's existence has all disappeared; gone even the memories of this early metropolis, for the oldest of valley residents hadn't even been born during its heyday. Luckily someone thought to record some of the events of that time and take a few pictures.

If you have an interest in the fascinating history of Mackay and the Valley, you're invited to join with the South Custer Historical Society in its collection and preservation. Please call 588-3133 or 588-3148 for information. We'd love to meet you.

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